Embedded clauses

1. Classifying embedded clauses

We can distinguish embedded clauses on the basis of several criteria:

a) their function as arguments (obligatorily required by the verb) or not:
   embedded clauses can be either the subject of the direct object of the verb (in
   the case of gerunds also indirect object, see lesson on gerunds) or be adverbial
   in nature (as such they are not required by the verb to have a well formed
   sentence)

b) the type of verbal form, which can be inflected or not (NB: English has very
   little inflectional morphology, only the s of the third person singular in the
   present and ed in the past, infinitival forms are bare stems)

c) their sentence type

We have seen that there are five sentence types: declaratives, interrogatives,
exclamatives, imperatives and relatives. Imperative clauses only occur in main
contexts, (at least in English and Italian) relatives are only embedded clauses
(because they are equivalent to adjectives) . The other three types are found both
in main and in embedded domains, the type of embedded clause is selected by the
main verb .

1. I know that the world is not flat declarative c.
2. I wonder whether the world is flat interrogative c.
3. It's amazing how flat the world is! exclamative c.

Different sentence types require different complementizers

2. Type of complementizers

Several types of complementizers introduce different types of embedded clauses: that is the complementiser of embedded inflected declarative clauses, for is the
complementiser of infinitival clauses with a lexical subject, whether of both
embedded inflected and infinitival interrogative clauses, and if is the
complementiser of inflected interrogative clauses.

   I am anxious that you should arrive on time
   *I am anxious that you to arrive on time
   I am anxious for you to arrive on time
   *I am anxious for you should arrive on time
   I don't know whether/if I should agree
   I don't know whether/*if to agree
Some cases which might look like infinitival forms, are to be considered as subjunctive forms, because the subject takes the nominative case and they have the complementiser *that*, typical of inflected clauses.

(1") I believe that he hates his syntax class
(2") a I demand/insist that he pay/*pays more attention to his syntax class
   b I demand/insist that he should pay more attention to his syntax class

(8) a I demand/insist that he be/*is left in peace
   b I demand/insist that he not take my syntax class (vs *...do(es) not take...*)
   c I demand/insist that he not be allowed in my syntax class (vs ?? ...be not ...*)

In English the complementizer that can be omitted in embedded declarative clauses

We know that the president will approve the project
We know the president will approve the project

The difference with Italian is striking. In Italian complementizers deletion is restricted by the following factors:

a) the type of main verb (which has to be a verb of verb of opinion as *credere, ritenere, pensare*)
b) the presence of a subjunctive, future or conditional form in the embedded clause
c) the presence of an overt preverbal subject in the embedded clause (only for some speakers)

() Credo sia già partito
() Mi dispiace sia già partito
() Dice è già partito
() Si dice sia già partito
() %Credevo Gianni fosse già partito

In English there is no such condition, complementizer deletion is extremely frequent in the spoken language. The same is true for restrictive relative clauses (not for appositive relative clauses!).

3 Type of verb and subject
The following examples show that in English it is possible to have embedded clauses with an inflected, infinitival or gerund form.

1. For John to go now would be a nuisance
2. That John should like syntax is amazing
3. John counted on them finishing the book soon (vs *on that they...)
4. We were quite surprised at so many people showing up at the meeting (vs *at that ....)
5. I wouldn't count on it raining tomorrow (vs *on that it will rain)
6. You may count on there being a lot of trouble tonight (vs *on that there ...)
7. There's a good chance of her recovering completely (vs *on that she will..)

As you can see, Italian and English differ with respect to the type of embedded clause (inflected or not) they select. In general verbs that can select the noun “il fatto che…” in Italian, do not select an inflected embedded clause in English.

It is possible to have subjects for both inflected and infinitival or gerund forms

1. I believe that most students hate syntax
2. I demand that students pay more attention to their syntax class
3. I believe most students to hate their syntax class
4. It would be silly for students to hate their syntax class
5. I don't like the idea of students not paying attention to their syntax class
6. I saw the students leave
7. I saw the students leaving

Notice that Italian also displays constructions on which a infinitival form can have a subject:

(8) Avendo Gianni perso il treno, siamo arrivati tutti in ritardo
(9) Per aver Gianni perso il treno, ci siamo trovati tutti nei guai
(10) Morto un papa, fatto un altro

In (8) there is gerund, in (9) an infinitival form introduced by a preposition and in (10) a past participle (this construction, known as absolute participial clause can tolerate only subjects of verbs that select the auxiliary essere in Italian). With gerunds and infinitives only sentence in which there is an auxiliary verb, there can be a subject

(11) Avendo Gianni già cenato, non l’abbiamo più aspettato
(12) *Cenando Gianni, non l’abbiamo più aspettato
This type of sentences generally convey the meaning of an event occurred before the event of the main clause, therefore they require an auxiliary to form a past tense.

Note that none of the Italian constructions is the counterpart of the English sentences seen above. Therefore, we conclude that the distribution of overt subjects with infinitival clauses is not the same in Italian and English.

However, in English the subject is always obligatory in inflected embedded clauses, while this is not always the case for infinitival and gerunds. Moreover, subjects of inflected verbs display nominative case, subjects of infinitival and gerund verbs have accusative case. This is shown by pronouns:

(1') I believe that they/*them hate syntax
(2') I demand that they/*them pay more attention to their syntax class
(3') I believe them/*they to hate their syntax class
(4') It would be silly for them/*they to hate their syntax class
(5') I don't like the idea of them/*they not paying attention to their syntax class
(6') I saw them/*they leave
(7') I saw them/*they leaving

The embedded clauses in (3') (4') and (7') are ungrammatical in Italian as a translation of their English counterpart:

(13) *Credo loro odiare le lezioni di sintassi
(14) %Sarebbe stupido per loro odiare le lezioni di linguistica
(15) %Ho visto loro partendo

As seen above, Italian does not have overt subjects with simple gerund or infinitival forms.

(14) and (15) are not impossible, but (14) can only be interpreted if per loro belongs to the main clause, while (15) has a different interpretation (it is the subject of the main clause who is leaving, while in (7') it is them)

The subject of a gerund can also be a genitive form as in the following cases:

(16) His running so fast surprised everybody,
(17) Our arriving so late was frowned upon by everybody

The distribution of overt subjects in English is the following:

b) a pronoun has nominative case if it is the subject of an inflected verb
c) a pronoun has accusative case if it is governed\(^1\) by a verb or the preposition for

We can say that in English the presence of the preposition for permits the realization of an overt subject in the embedded clause. The same is true with verbs of the class of *believe*, which license the presence of a non-nominative subject in the embedded infinitival clause. Notice that the pronoun them in (3’) is NOT the object of the verb believe but the subject of the embedded verb. However, the use of the preposition *for* is different from the use of the preposition *per* in Italian (see above)

Exercise:

Why are the following sentences impossible in English?

* [John/*him to be a fool] is believed by everyone / I believe [John/him to be a fool]

*It would be a mistake [John/him to go now] [For John to go now] would be a mistake /It would be a mistake [for John/him to go now]

\(^1\) The term government is a technical term in linguistics, here it means simply that the pronoun is following the verb or the preposition